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ABSTRACT

Educational research has been meeting resistance in its effort to influence curricular policy or to change classroom practice because of the lack of value placed on it by those who exercise power over and in higher institutions of learning. In order to counteract this resistance it is important to identify those predisposed to effect change in the classrooms. This involves finding a way to discover exactly what motivates those who teach writing to act as they now do--and what might begin to motivate them to reflect critically on their practice to see if it is actually meeting their needs. Until now, teachers, particularly writing teachers, have been the passive receivers of university-research pronouncements concerning what should be taught and how it should be learned. A year-long observation of a teacher inservice program to train writing teachers in the composing process revealed a negative teacher response. This response to these composition inservice sessions, conducted by an academic researcher, shows how such university-based efforts can easily fail. Another result was the discovery of divergent goals by those who planned the inservice sessions and those who were supposed to benefit from them. Based on these observations, it is recommended that teachers should become active participants in their own research projects and learn to examine the contradictory patterns of meaning that can emerge from school settings, which ultimately can determine what is taught in classrooms and what knowledge is suppressed. (Six references are appended.) (MS)

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ABSTRACT

Composition Teachers Need to Become Teacher-Researchers: Reflections Based on an Ethnography of Teacher Training Sessions

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This paper begins by discussing how difficult it is for traditional educational research to influence curricular policy or to change classroom practice. For too long, it is argued, teachers have been the passive receivers of university-researcher pronouncements concerning what should be taught and how it should be learned. Writing teachers, in particular, have fallen prey to this trickle-down theory of educational research. Negative teacher response to a series of composition inservices conducted by an academic researcher is cited to show how such university-based efforts can easily fail.

The paper concludes by suggesting that teachers need to become active participants in their own research projects. They might begin by examining the contradictory patterns of meaning that can emerge from school settings that are often rife with struggles involving power, status, and domination. As education critic Henry Giroux points out, struggles such as these can ultimately determine what is taught in classrooms and what knowledge is suppressed.

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Composition Teachers Need to Become Teacher-Researchers: Reflections Based on an Ethnography of Teacher Training Sessions

(A paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication--St. Louis, Missouri, March 17, 1988)

Even though research that is delving into the nature of composing processes appears to be flourishing as more and more of us in academe are taking seriously the struggles of our students, it is a very awkward time for those of us who practice such research in the hope that somehow what we do might influence curricular policy and classroom practice. In fact, it has increasingly become apparent to me that many of those who exercise the most power over our institutions and academic departments often seem to be the very people who value our efforts the least.

For instance, Derek Bok, the president of one of our most popular and prestigious universities, recently asserted in Change magazine that he and his faculty are very skeptical of the value and validity of what he somewhat pejoratively called educational research into the nature of learning. And he bluntly concluded that such research has little hope of effecting change in higher education.

John Silber, also the president of a major university, echoed Bok's sentiments just a few months ago in an address to the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education. Among other

things, he implied that the quality of teaching in this country would greatly improve if we ignore what the researchers say about the way students learn.

English Departments, too, have been sending a similar message. Several weeks ago, for instance, I talked with a department chair from an Ohio college who told me that his department was developing a new composition testing program that would help ensure literacy in writing by measuring the number of mechanical errors in student papers. Such an effort, of course, blatantly denies all that we have been learning about the complexity of writing and the fact that errors are often necessary to the development of any writer.

Unfortunately, our colleagues in high school English departments are not untouched by these sorts of attitudes. Once, I was told by an English teacher from Tarpon Springs, Florida that she is actually required by her department chair and the state of Florida to force her students to write a certain number of words every week. It is as if attaining skill in writing were simply a matter of churning out an easily quantifiable amount of work that can be dutifully noted in a lesson-plan book. Such a view, of course, directly contradicts what composition research has long been saying: No causal relationship has ever been established between the amount of writing done by students and the quality of the writing itself.

I mention all of this disturbing information not to denigrate our efforts as composition researchers, nor to paint a

hopeless, dismal picture of our profession. Instead, I am simply trying to point out that this current state-of-affairs raises an interesting question: If our research efforts are far too often meeting with resistance, what can we do to break down a bit of this resistance--or at the very least counteract it--in order to begin to ensure that what we do has a chance to actually influence classroom practice and perhaps change it for the better?

As you can probably tell by now, I do not believe that the answer to this question lies in more of what we might call traditional social science research which to a large extent seeks to mimic the techniques of our friends in the laboratory who are fond of isolating variables and spewing out reams of statistical data. Writers simply cannot be isolated from the world they live in, and writing can never be reduced to data. Instead, I think that our answer to this question may be found by using a very basic premise. If we want to effect change in classrooms, if we want, say, our colleagues down the hall (or those down at the local high school) to rethink how they teach writing, we must first identify who among them is predisposed to such change. And such an effort, of course, involves finding a way to discover exactly what motivates those who teach writing to act as they now do--and what might begin to motivate them to critically reflect on their practice to see if it is actually meeting their needs.

It is easy to see that such an effort must involve what have come to be known as ethnographic techniques--methods we have

begun to borrow from cultural anthropology. Needless to say, if we are to discover the meanings and motives people bring to bear on their situation as a writer or as a teacher of writing, we must immerse ourselves in school and university settings in order to study and record what goes on without ripping anything from the context in which it occurs, and without taking anything for granted. And we must perform this task with great care, authentically attempting to discover all of the complexity and contradictory meanings such a research effort can unearth. In other words, we certainly do not want to be called amateur anthropologists who are simply dabbling with the methods of another discipline.

But such an effort alone is not enough. For once we have done our job as ethnographers, once we have triangulated our triangulations and interpreted our interpretations in order to reach a phenomenological understanding of those who live and work in a particular setting, we still have more work to do if, indeed, it is our purpose to change things and not merely understand them. This next step involves making our efforts critical--critical in the sense of the word as it is used by Nancy Mack, Henry Giroux and others who believe that we must operate under the political and moral imperative that things must change within a system of schooling governed far too often by oppressive power relations inherent in western capitalistic culture.

Such a critical stance toward our work as ethnographers might take many forms. But for me, it basically involves a willingness to search for and expose the contradictions that are embedded in any social setting where power, status, and domination may be present. And one major contradiction that might be worth exploring is the one I have already stressed: Why is it that those in power often tend to ignore the very research that their own institutions are generating?

I do not, of course, have the time today to attempt an answer to this question. But I can share with you for a few moments a critical research project that I conducted, one that may shed a little light on this question and one that I think may have some significance for writing program administrators who, after all, are quite often called upon to change the way writing is taught in university and secondary school classrooms.

I conducted my research in a large, twelve district county school system over the course of twelve months. At the beginning of my effort, I had just been hired as an English curriculum coordinator for these districts which were about to launch a massive teacher inservice program to train teachers of writing in what has popularly been referred to as the composing process.

Let me indicate just how massive this effort was. First of all, an outside university expert had been hired to conduct the training sessions, and he was to be paid $400 per day plus expenses. He was to have ample opportunity to earn this money , for this training was not to be a one time proposition. In fact,

he eventually spent over twenty-six days in the school districts working with teachers and administrators. The inservice sessions themselves took place once a month for four nights a week throughout the school year. This effort was to be ongoing, and teachers were expected to give up some of there free time to attend. To lure them to the meetings after school hours, dinner was served after each training session at one of the areas well-known restaurants. It was believed, I suppose, that if dinner were served first people might not stay to be trained.

The effort, though, did not stop here. During the school day, the writing expert was scheduled to visit classrooms of various teachers throughout the county. The idea was for the expert to display his teaching techniques under actual classroom conditions. But despite the careful planning (which, by the way, had been initiated before I had assumed my role as researcher and curriculum consultant), I soon noticed that this effort was in trouble. For instance, all sorts of puzzling contradictions began to catch my attention:

1. First of all, the expert was scheduled to talk one day in late August about the "complexities of composing" for three hours. Instead, he spent thirty-five minutes discussing the words drafting and pre-writing. In other words, he did not seem to want to address the issues he said he would address.
2. Attendance, too, presented me with a contradiction: Whereas fifty-seven teachers had been recruited to attend

on a given evening, many times as few as eight or fifteen would actually appear at the session.

3. At the very beginning of the school year, I began to notice mumblings of discontent from teachers who had, ironically enough, been hand-picked because of their loyalty to their administrators and because of their keen interest in the teaching of writing.

All of these contradictions (and many others) aroused an intense curiosity within me. And since I was in a unique position to observe and interact with all of those involved in many different contexts, I began to assume the role of school ethnographer in order to explore my questions about this project.

After an entire year of observing classrooms, and of interviewing the expert, the teachers, and the students, I eventually discovered what appeared to be four major contradictory patterns of meaning that may have contributed to the failure of this inservice project, especially among the high school teachers. These patterns simply reflected the fact that those who planned the inservice sessions and those who were supposed to benefit from them were working at cross-purposes and held entirely different assumptions about what the nature of such an effort should be.

The first pattern I have labelled simplicity vs. complexity. Whereas the university researcher-expert and school district administration believed that teachers needed a simple explanation of what they should do in their classes, teachers themselves

needed and wanted complex explanations of the theory underlying the notion of the composing process they were expected to learn and to teach. As one teacher put it, she wanted more than warmed over Aristotle.

The second pattern I have labelled freedom vs. control. Whereas the expert and the administration believed that teachers needed and wanted a pre-packaged set of ideas that could be used to teach writing, the teachers themselves continually expressed the idea that teaching should be a highly creative and individual act. As a result, many teachers resisted attempts by the expert to give them a pre-ordained set of teaching tips.

The third pattern I have labelled change vs. stagnation. Whereas administrators seemed to genuinely believe that the teaching of writing could and would change as a result of this inservice effort, the teachers themselves saw little reason to alter their classroom practice. In fact, I saw no evidence that any teacher substantially changed the way he or she approached the teaching of writing in the classroom.

The fourth pattern I have labelled broad impact vs. specific concerns. Whereas administrators continually talked of the broad impact this series of inservices would have on all local school districts, the teachers themselves stressed the particular concerns each of them had about their individual classroom situations. What do I do with my kids? This question typifies the teachers' foremost concern.

These patterns might seem rather obvious to anyone at all familiar with school life. Nonetheless, those involved in the planning and execution of this writing project did not act as if any of these patterns were known to anyone. And that, of course, is an interesting contradiction in itself. Those who purport to be experts in writing pedagogy may in fact know very little about those they would teach how to teach, despite the sincerity, knowledge, and good intentions many university experts bring to their jobs as inservice leaders. In any case, to my way of thinking, discovering such contradictory patterns is directly related to discovering an answer to the questions I raised a few moments ago: What is it that motivates writing teachers to act as they do? And what might begin to motivate them as they attempt to change their practice? I can offer no ultimate answers. But if my study is any indication of how teachers themselves respond to attempts to educate them, it appears that one thing we must avoid is the old trickle-down method of inservice training.

Instead, it seems that teachers need ways to discover for themselves what outside experts can never teach them in a missionary-mentality kind of way. In other words, teachers need to become researchers alongside of us to explore in their own way the contradictory patterns that exist in their schools and in their classrooms. As one of them told me after reading my research about her, "Why is it that those who actually have the classroom problems are never given credit for being able to come

up with their own solutions? It's as if we have nothing to say about anything." Even though she was angry--very angry--when she said this, I can think of no more intellectually critical question than the one she raised. It is almost as if she were echoing Ira Shor who tells us that power and hope are the sources of motivation to learn and to do and to solve our own problems.

To put it in basic terms, the teachers I studied had no motivation to change their classroom practice because they felt they had no power to shape what they were to learn. And they had no hope of ever gaining that power as long as university researcher-experts were looked to as the sole source of knowledge. I simply know of no better way to help break this pervasive feeling of powerlessness in our schools than by inviting all who labor in them to join us in becoming active participants in their own critical research, instead of the passive receivers of pre-packaged curricula and expert advice they have been for far too long. Then maybe, just maybe, once teachers begin to possess knowledge they themselves produce, it will become increasingly difficult for those who hold institutional power to ignore the value and validity of the research that goes on in our school and university classrooms.

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